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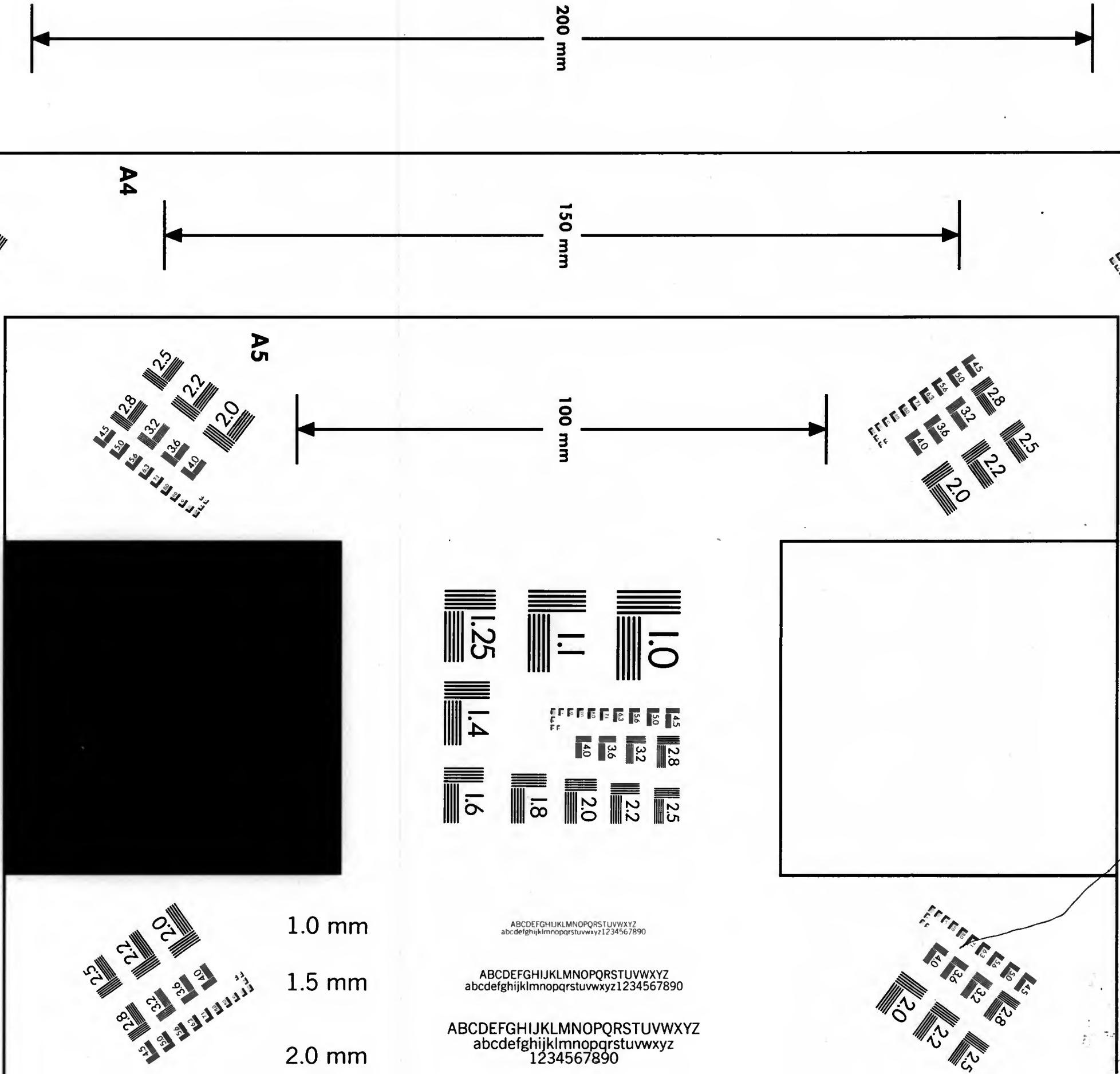
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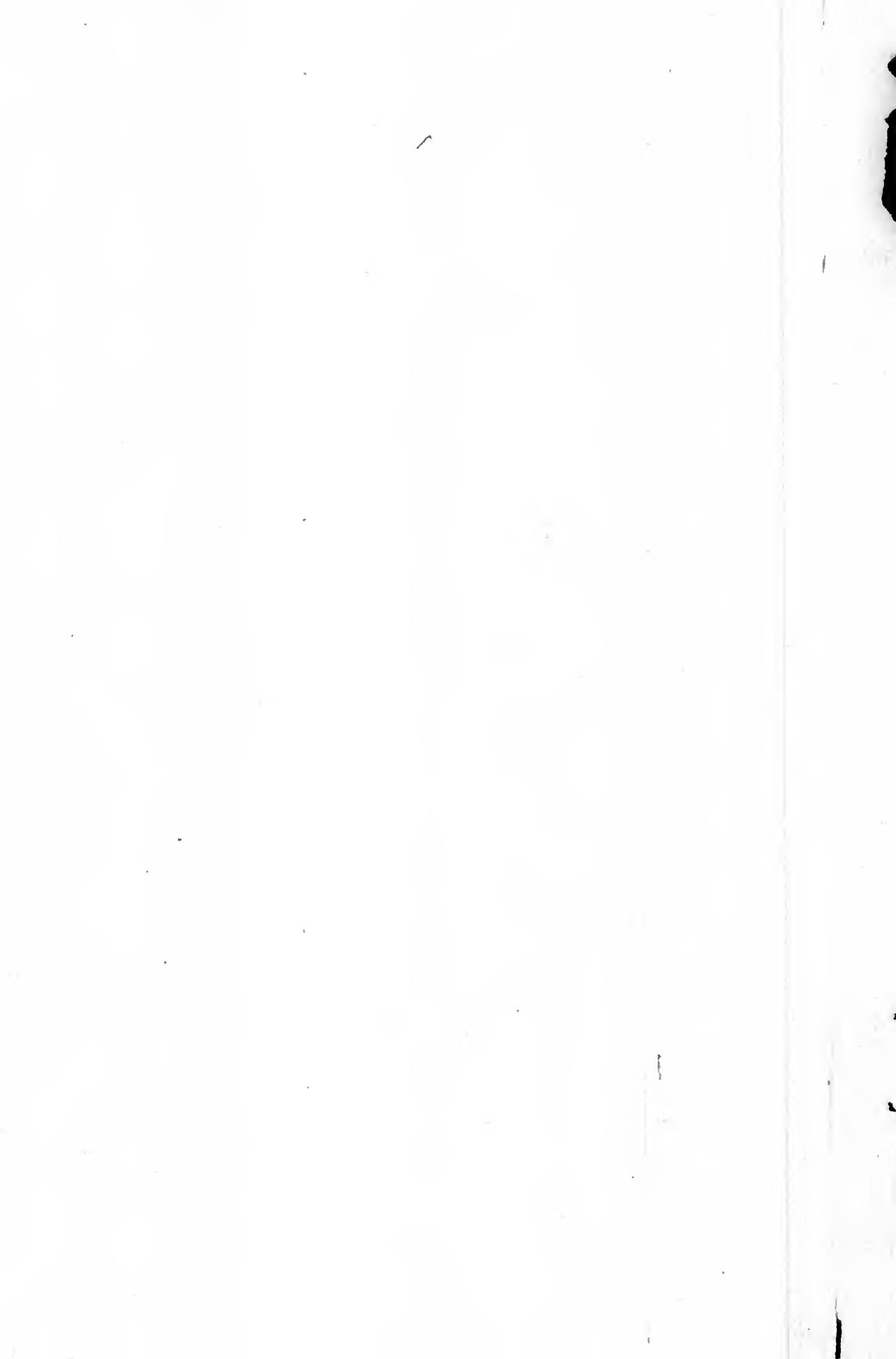
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Illinois:

The Origins

Clarence Walworth Alford, Ph. D.

Illinois State Reformatory Print



MILITARY TRACT PAPERS

No. 3.

ILLINOIS: THE ORIGINS

AN ADDRESS BY

CLARENCE WALWORTH ALVORD, PH. D.,

Associate Professor of History,
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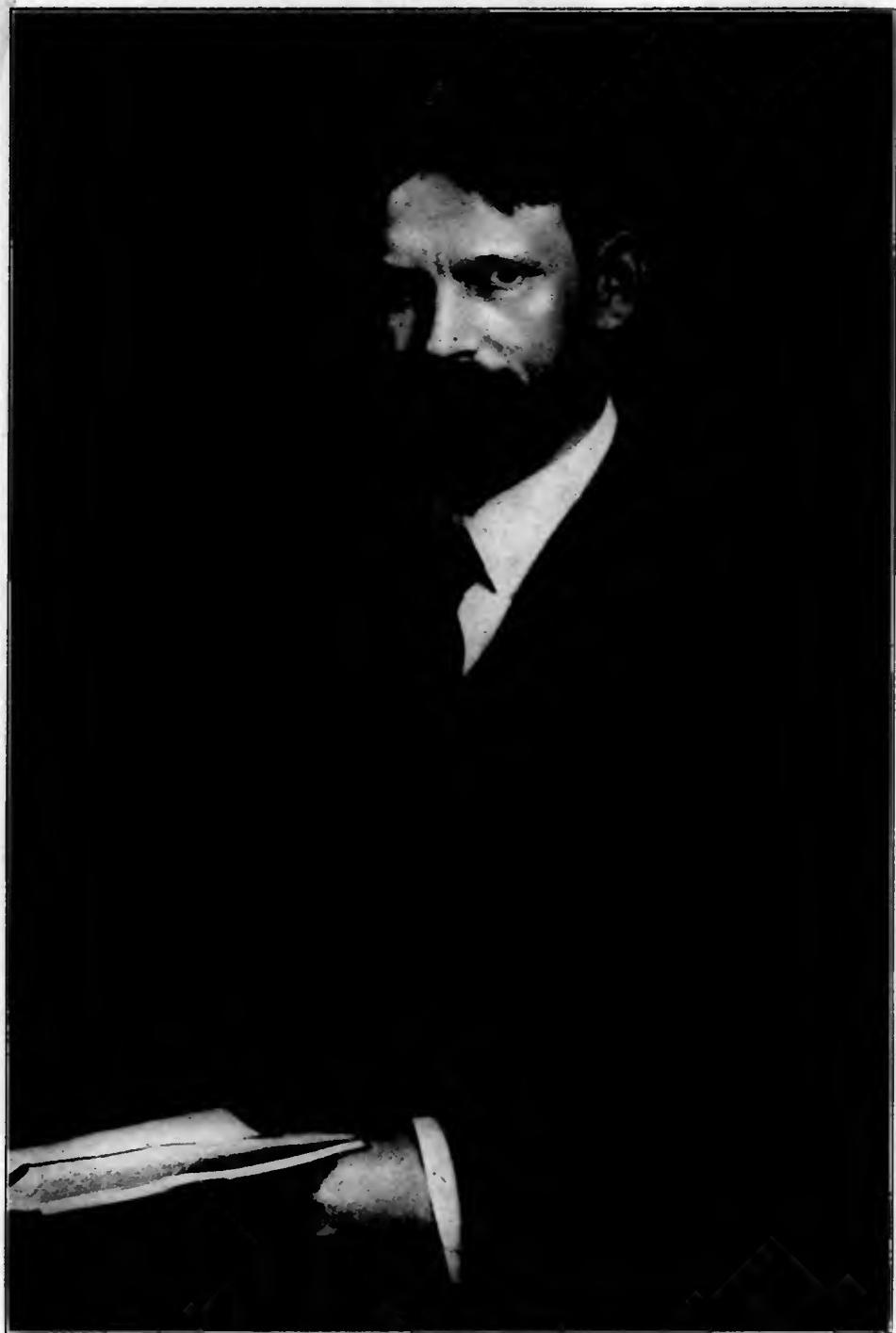
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AND STUDENTS

OF THE

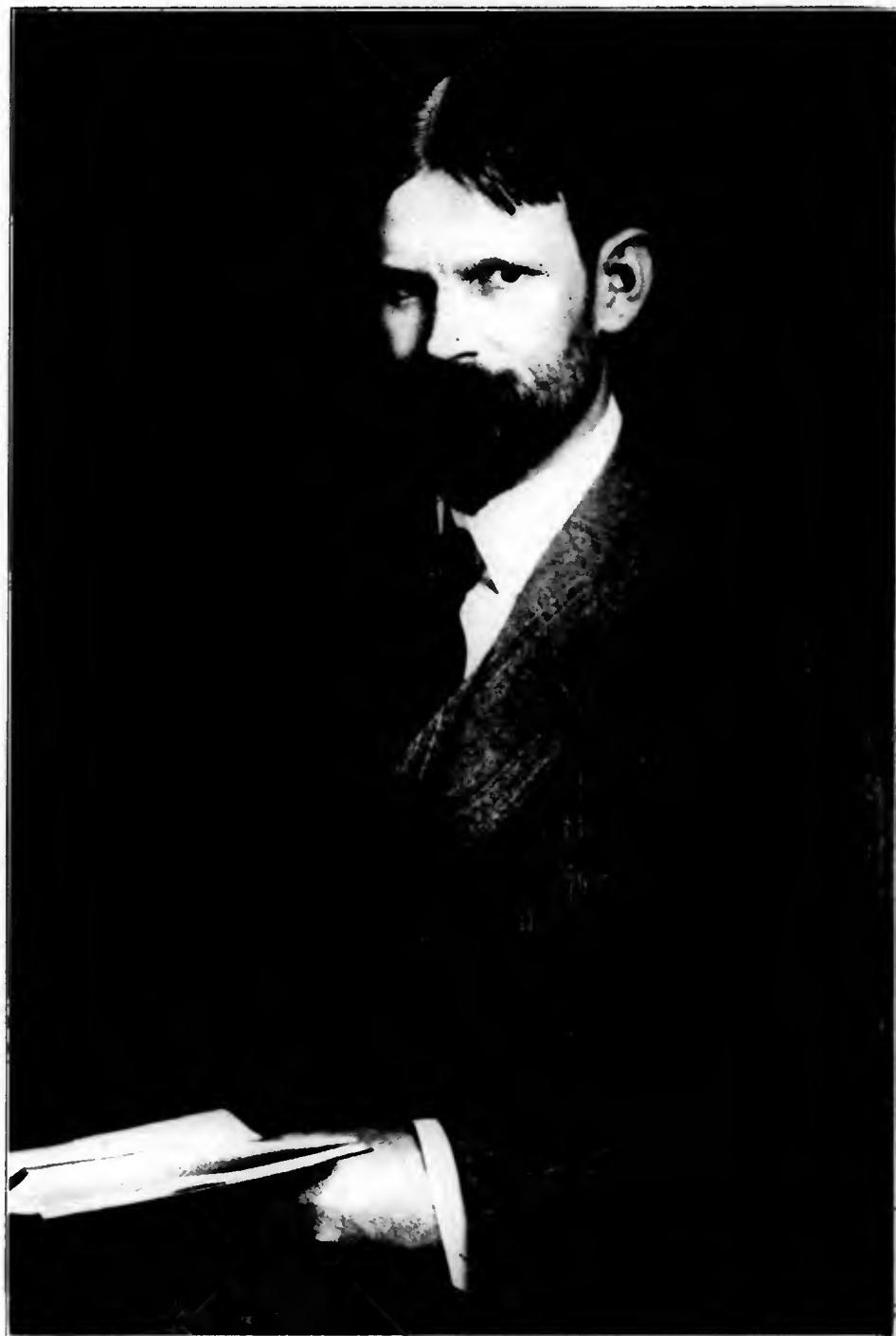
WESTERN ILLINOIS STATE NORMAL SCHOOL

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3, 1909

372



CLARENCE WALWORTH ALVORD, Ph. D.



CLARENCE WALWORTH ALVORD, Ph. D.

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ILLINOIS—THE ORIGINS

Within recent years an interesting phenomenon within the schools of Illinois as well as in the state at large is forcing itself on our attention. I refer to the ever increasing activity in the celebration of important events in the history of the territory that has come to be known as the State of Illinois. The forces back of these recurring celebrations, although we are more or less unconscious of them, have sprung from a feeling of state unity and state personality; a feeling that has grown rather late in the West. We have not been surprised in the past when such states as Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia, held celebrations in honor of their great men and the events that are land marks in their development, because in these eastern states there was nurtured during the colonial period a particularism which gave to each of them an almost national existence at the time they entered the Union; but within these states of the great Mississippi Valley, there was no long period of territorial unity preceding the condition of statehood and the entrance into national relations. The boundary lines that run this way and that upon the map of the West are generally artificial in character, and have been drawn for the most part by men that were not directly connected in any way with the states which have thus been marked off. Take the case of Illinois itself. To the average Illinoisans there has been very little significance that a line separated us from our sister state to the east, for the peaceful increase of the two communities, thus divided by an artificial line, has run so similar a course that no event in the past of either has given cause for a very material differentiation. The immigrants who have settled to the east or to the west of that particular line have been of the same stock, and the reasons for fixing any particular settlement on this side or that side of the line have been accidental in character, and have not in any way emphasized a difference between the people.

The development of a state personality, this feeling of solidarity, has taken place in Illinois, not during her territorial period, but during her period of statehood. And now

that almost a century has run its course since the time when this territory was declared of age, this consciousness of the distinct personality of the great Prairie State has stored up sufficient force to arouse in us a feeling of pride in our past, as something in which other states have not participated. One of the forms by which this consciousness exhibits itself is in the celebration of anniversaries, such as has drawn us together tonight.

There is another way in which we are proclaiming our pride in the past of our state that is equally significant, namely, through the work of our historians. Perhaps in no state in the Union is there greater activity in the study of local history than is found in Illinois. Our State Historical Society is among the largest. The State Historical Library is showing an activity which rivals the work of any other institution of similar kind and is, I hope, wisely expending the appropriations made by the legislature. There is a praiseworthy activity in the local historical societies; and the individuals who are working upon Illinois history are increasing in numbers every year. The state legislature, aside from its appropriation to the State Historical Library, has displayed its interest in another way, by passing a bill requiring a knowledge of state history from all candidates for teachers positions. This action on the part of the legislature may be open to criticism; but, from our view-point tonight, it is an exhibition of state pride, of the consciousness of a past, the knowledge of which is regarded as a valuable acquisition for the citizens of this community.

This development of an appreciation of the state's past among our people should be a cause of congratulation, for the result of this energy, although it may be occasionally misdirected, will finally exercise great influence upon our citizens, when our true history is better known, because we have a past that has been of great value to humanity, a past which, on the whole, we may contemplate with pride.

The event which we celebrate here this evening is one that marks a distinct epoch in the history of Illinois, a change

in life that is of such a character that we may say that the whole previous history of the territory had but little effect thereafter; for the entrance of Illinois into the Union was not an event closely connected with the 18th century events of this particular region. Up until 1809, we may regard Illinois as simply a portion of the great western area, the destinies of which were still to be determined. The particular locality known as Illinois had not differentiated itself in any material way from other parts of the western territory; and in writing the early history of the state, one is obliged to ignore later state lines. We have to tell the history of the Northwest, or the history of the Central West, or the history of the whole Mississippi Valley, not the history of Illinois. Take the important figures in the history of the region during this earlier period, and you will find that in every case they do not belong particularly to Illinois, but to the greater area of which this district was but a part. We can advance no exclusive claim to Joliet, Marquette, LaSalle, the great discoverers of the Mississippi basin, any more than can our sister states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana. The events that led to the first settlement of Illinois by Frenchmen were closely connected with the imperial policy of the court of Louis XIV, an all inclusive policy which would colonize the whole Mississippi basin, and regarded the planting of the little villages of Cahokia and Kaskaskia as but the advance posts of a great French community. That these were within Illinois meant nothing to the French; and the founders of the settlements, the priests first and the later soldiers, belonged not to Illinois but to the whole Mississippi Valley, where they and their contemporaries planted similar missions, villages, and forts. This lack of real territorial history is also true of the period of the English and Virginia control of the country. The particular English merchants and officers who occupied Kaskaskia, Fort de Chartres, Cahokia, were not men that may be claimed by Illinois alone, but belonged to a great number of other states. George Rogers Clark, the greatest hero of

them all, the man, who was one of the instruments of Providence in saving for the new state that was being born the Great Northwest, belongs to the people of Kentucky and Indiana, as well as to us.

So coming down the line, we do not find any point in which the Illinois territory may be said to have a peculiar history until the separation of this territory from Indiana by act of Congress in 1809. And even then, from 1809 until the state was admitted to the Union in 1818, the active forces that were to make Illinois the state she has become were not completely developed; for it was not until the actual entrance of the state into the Union that the full flood of immigration, which was to raise the territory from insignificance to prominence, occurred. Therefore, although 1809 might rival the date of 1818 as the barrier between the past of Illinois and her future, still the more important event of the entrance of the territory into the United States may more justly be acknowledged as marking that wonderful change of which we today are conscious.

It is my purpose this evening to sketch roughly the population of Illinois at the moment that she passed from the territorial state, at the moment that she shook off her connection with her past, at the moment when she ceased to be but a part of a greater whole, and became ILLINOIS. At that time, there were but few elements in the state that gave great promise of the future development. The settlements that went to make up the Illinois of that day were confined to the southeastern part of the present territory and were distributed in somewhat of a half moon shape along the Illinois, Mississippi and Ohio rivers, stretching from Peoria to Shawneetown and extending inland from the river banks but a few miles. The elements of this population are of such a character that it is not so very difficult for us to analyze it in order to gain an understanding of what was this Illinois of 1818, which passed from her territorial estate into that of full statehood.

The oldest element in the region was the French. It is a problem, not yet solved, to discover exactly what were the influences upon the later development of Illinois that have come from the French population scattered along the American Bottom; but tonight I shall venture to advance an hypothesis. The history of these French villages was already over a century old in 1818. Cahokia had been established as a mission station of the Seminary of Quebec as early as March 1699, and Kaskaskia was made a mission station of the Jesuits in the following year. From that time there was a slow infiltration of population, largely from Canada, although some few families of the American Bottom traced their origin directly to France, *via* New Orleans. And yet, the population was never large. Perhaps in the most prosperous days of the French *regime* the French population in the American Bottom did not number over two thousand. But that period was before the King of France had ceded in 1763 all claims to the eastern bank of the Mississippi to the British King. From the time of the arrival of the English soldiers in the country of the Illinois, in October 1765, there was an ever increasing emigration from the eastern to the western bank. At first the enterprise of Laclede and Chouteau in founding St. Louis attracted many of the French to the more favorable situation on the western bank; but after the first excitement caused by the announcement that the Illinois country was no longer French, the population of the American Bottom remained practically stationary, although there are indications of some re-immigration from St. Louis to Kaskaskia and Cahokia, after the French learned that France had also ceded the western bank to Spain. This situation was unchanged until 1778. By the arrival of George Rogers Clark and the Virginians, on a July night of that year, the immigration from the eastern bank to the western bank became much more rapid. The history of the contact of these Frenchmen of Roman Catholic religion and Gallic culture with the large framed, energetic, uncultured American pioneers, was dramatic in character. The story of the

tyranny they suffered as the French tell it themselves in the Kaskaskia and Cahokia Records thrills today our hearts and arouses our sympathy. Shortly after the arrival of Clark, the prominent and influential Frenchmen began to leave the villages and established themselves on the Spanish side. It is a mistake to think of the Illinois French of the mid-eighteenth century as unenterprising, ignorant, superstitious, terms of disparagement that are used in describing them by writers of the last years of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th century. Those who remained on the eastern bank did not represent the best elements in the French population. The great leaders of the French, leaders in their economic and political development, had deserted them and had transferred their citizenship to Spain. The census of the Missouri side that was drawn up by the Spanish Commandants in the early nineties reads today like a census of Southern Illinois of 1778. You find in the villages of Missouri the names of the men who had sympathized with the American cause, who had sided with George Rogers Clark, who had made it possible for him to hold the Northwest, who had given of their property for his support, and who had marched with him over the flooded ground of Illinois to conquer Vincennes. Here in the Spanish villages you find Gabriel Cerrè, Charles Gratiot, the families of the Saucier, of the Brazeaux, of the Beauvais, of the Charlevilles, men who were the leaders of the Illinois country when the Virginians made that famous march from the Ohio River and occupied the villages of the American Bottom.

This emigration began in Kaskaskia earlier than it did in the northern village of Cahokia, because in the former village was stationed the garrison left by Clark and in its neighborhood settled the Americans who first found their way into the Northwest as immigrants. The oppression of the Virginians, therefore, fell upon the Kaskaskia French much more severely than upon their northern neighbors, and despair of better conditions drove them sooner to the Spanish bank. Between 1778 and 1790 about 70% of the population

of Kaskaskia fled before the advancing Americans, and there was left in the village only a few families of the less enterprising class.

The village of Cahokia, on the other hand, had been able to maintain order during these trying years, and its French citizens had displayed a remarkable capacity for local self government. Here for years there was practically local autonomy, and the citizens supported an efficient administration, which suppressed disorders in the community and even compelled the few American pioneers who found their way into the neighborhood to obey the laws. On the whole, Cahokia led a peaceful life during the same years that were such trying ones for her southern neighbor; and at the end of the period her population showed a slight increase. After the United States had established in 1790 her government over this region, the number of English speaking pioneers increased slightly. These men of our backwoods were aggressive, self-reliant, and were much more capable of taking care of themselves than the French; nor were they willing to accept the authority of the older settlers, whom they held in considerable contempt. Without question, also, the religious differences played a part, and the Scotch-Irish Protestant refused to obey a Roman Catholic Frenchman. For these reasons there was an almost immediate change in the personnel of the official class after 1790. The names are generally English, German, Irish, while the number of French names was diminishing to the vanishing point.

This new government established under the United States was inefficient and proved itself incapable of maintaining order in the communities, nor was it able to ward off the attacks of the Indians. At the same time, Spain was making earnest efforts to induce immigration into her Mississippi possessions, and in particular had great hopes of alluring the French from their allegiance. Similar in religion, and accustomed to the same kind of government, there was reason to believe that under proper encouragement the French would cross the river and that the eastern bank might be

completely deserted. The diplomacy used by the Spanish was eminently successful. The priests of the American Bottom, such as Father LeDru, Father St. Pierre, Father Gibault, were persuaded to leave the shrinking population of the American villages and to identify themselves with the growing communities on the Spanish shore. The three priests accepted the parishes at St. Louis, St. Genevieve, and New Madrid. Besides thus discouraging the French by taking away their spiritual leader, the Spanish encouraged the Indians in their attacks upon the American villages, and then to make assurance doubly sure, they offered large tracts of land to enterprising Frenchmen who would come to them. The result was that the many Frenchmen who still lingered on the American side, particularly the men who had managed to maintain good order at Cahokia, gradually passed over the river, so that by the end of the century the number of these oldest settlers on the American Bottom was very small; and their influence upon the politics, upon the economic conditions, and even upon the social life had become almost a negligible quantity. There remained of the French occupation of the American Bottom, little more than a memory. Here and there a few families still lingered in their old homes, but the prominent French names of the early 19th century, such as Menard and Jarrot, belonged to men who are not descendants of the old French families, but are new comers, who had adjusted themselves to American pioneer conditions, and by this adjustment had won the esteem of their fellow Americans. Since the year 1800 there is scarcely a public name of any prominence in Illinois history that belonged to the old French families of the American Bottom. The Illinois of the 19th century was thus cut off from that influence that is so marked in St. Louis and in some of the smaller towns of the western bank; and the French Creoles have never played a part in Illinois affairs in anything like the way that they have done in the villages across the river.

Before the United States had established the govern-

ment in Illinois territory in 1790, a few American families had found their way to this region. These had come in the wake of George Rogers Clark's army. Possibly a few of Clark's soldiers also had settled in the locality, although the muster lists of Clark's troops do not contain very many of the names of the early Illinois pioneers. In 1780 several frontiersmen under the leadership of Henry Smith, evidently coming from Virginia, reached Kaskaskia, and were permitted by Col. Montgomery, one of the officers of George Rogers Clark, to settle on the bluffs at a place then known as Belle Fontaine. They built a small stockade fort, and were able to defend themselves here for a decade, until the United States took possession. Another small community, a few years later, settled at Grand Ruisseau, a few miles south of Cahokia, and acknowledged the court of that place as the government of their little community. Up and down the American Bottom there were scattered also a few farms and stockades. We have a list of these early Americans in the region, a list that contains the signatures of 131 settlers. Some of these may have been small boys, probably were, but they are the names of the first English speaking citizens of the Illinois territory, and from them were sprung some of our later well known families; for example, the Oglesbys and Bonds.

These new comers could obtain lands in two ways, one illegally, and the other legally. The illegal manner was to petition the court of Kaskaskia or of Cahokia for grants. Neither of these courts had the least authority to take cognizance of such petitions, but the exigencies of the case seemed to demand action; and, therefore, both did grant to many Americans farms of 400 acres. The Cahokia court, which was more careful in its legal acts, made their grants subject to the condition of confirmation by the proper authorities. The Kaskaskia court, which was more disorganized and more nearly controlled by the new comers, seems to have acted without much thought of right or legality. The legal manner of obtaining lands was to buy them from the French;

and this was not very difficult since so many of the French were migrating to the western shore.

As you may see from the figures that I have given, the number of American settlers, 131 in all, was not very large in 1790. It formed, however, the advance guard of the later immigration. This advance guard was slow in being strengthened by recruits. American immigrants came to Illinois between the years 1790 and 1800 only in sufficient numbers to bring the population slightly above the figure it had reached in the most prosperous times of the French regime, fifty years before. After a century of occupation the territory of Illinois could count within its borders a little under 2500 people.

To us moderns who view the fertile fields of grain extending in every direction through the state and who know the mineral wealth below the surface of the ground, it seems amazing that there was not a rush of settlers to the region in spite of the difficulties that confronted them. These difficulties were, however, very real, and we must pause a moment to take account of them, for otherwise we shall never appreciate the various causes which made the entrance of Illinois into the Union such a significant turning point in her history.

The first difficulty that deterred immigrants from coming to the territory was the prairies that have proved in the end her richest possession. The pioneer looking for lands had a rule of thumb for selecting lands. It was this. Where the largest and tallest trees grow, there lies the most fertile land. Illinois is a prairie state. The greatest part of her territory was treeless. The natural inference was that the land that could not produce trees must be worthless as farm land. If you will read the journal of George Washington's trip to the West, you will notice how enthusiastic he grows over the land of tall timber. He was but applying the rule known to all westerners. In 1786 James Monroe, the later president, wrote of the Northwest; "A great part of the territory is miserably poor, especially that near Lakes

Michigan and Erie, and that upon the Mississippi and the Illinois consists of extensive plains which have not had from appearances, and will not have, a single bush on them for ages. The districts, therefore, within which these fall will never contain a sufficient number of inhabitants to entitle them to membership in the confederacy." Historians have frequently asserted that Clark's soldiers gave such glowing accounts of Illinois that they attracted thither many settlers. The number of Americans drawn to Illinois by these so-called glowing accounts do not appear in the records, save for the few that have been noted. There may have been 1500 Americans all told when the 19th century began. Certainly not all Clark's companions were favorably impressed with the territory, or we should have found a larger population. John Todd, appointed in 1779 county lieutenant for this region, one of Clark's best friends, said he preferred Kentucky to Illinois, "either for the ambitious man, the retired farmer, or the young merchant." He found the climate particularly unwholesome. Another quotation—and this time from the citizens of Illinois themselves—will show how universal was the unfavorable opinion of the land. In a memorial written by the people of Illinois in 1805 occurs this statement. Because of the extensive prairies between Illinois and Vincennes, "a communication between them and the settlements east of the river (the Wabash) can not in the common course of things, for centuries yet to come, be supported with the least benefit, or be of the least moment to either of them."

Besides this traditional low estimate of the value of prairie lands there were real obstacles to their occupation. The only means of easy communication with the other states was by water, so that if a farmer or merchant expected to send his products to a distant market he must settle near a stream. Hence the early settlements of Illinois were placed like fringes along the river banks. From such a location the farmer had another advantage, for the banks of the streams were wooded, and it was with wood that he built his

house and barns, and it was with wood fires that he cooked his meals and kept warm in winter, for the period of the general use of coal had not yet arrived.

The above reasons were sufficiently weighty to deter settlement on these supposed wastes and it was not until 1814, four years before Illinois was admitted to the Union, that the first daring pioneers penetrated into the prairies and set up their log cabins and barns, the precursors of the farm buildings of the modern era.

Closely connected with the above retarding forces was the tradition widely spread throughout the country that Illinois was particularly unhealthy. The evidence for this seemed to be conclusive for the French had always suffered from malaria and the first comers among the American pioneers suffered from the same complaint. There was very good reason for this general experience. The French had chosen the bottom lands where there were always standing pools of stagnant water, the breeding places of malarial bearing mosquitoes. Even on the undrained prairies similar breeding places were numerous, so that it is not surprising that the first experience of the early inhabitants was the "shakes" for which recourse was had to quinine and whiskey.

The reasons thus given were not, however, insurmountable nor would they have had prohibitive force sufficient to account for the slow infiltration of immigrants. Other causes were more effective. The first of which was the difficulty in obtaining titles to lands. The American Bottom had practically been granted away during the French Regime. What was ungranted had been illegally given to immigrants by the British military commandants and the Virginia courts. Most of these land grants were written in the French language, and drawn according to French law, a cause of difficulty to the agents of the United States sent to settle the various legal questions arising from them. The illegality of the numerous land grants increased the difficulty, particularly as Congress had passed a blanket con-

firmation of all grants that might have been made in good faith. To this there was added an act by the Continental Congress in 1788 and another in 1791 by the United States Congress granting land to the settlers already in Illinois. In this way the utmost confusion resulted and no one was assured of a good title to any property he might purchase. This difficulty was not overcome until almost the date of the entrance of Illinois into the Union.

This confusion retarded immigration more completely because this granted land was the only purchasable land in Illinois. Squatters might settle here and there, but no one was able to secure any kind of a title except to the land which had been granted before 1791. Matters seemed to take a more favorable turn, when in 1804 a land office was established in Kaskaskia; but unfortunately no land was to be offered for sale until existing private claims were adjusted. Now began a systematic attempt to bring order out of chaos; but the subject was a difficult one and delay after delay was granted, so that it was not until 1814 that the sales of public land in Illinois began and immigration was really encouraged by the possibility of purchasing indisputable titles to the fertile fields. Notice that this again was only four years before the admission of the state to the Union.

From this time on every encouragement to settlement was given by the national government. At the very time that the public lands were thrown on the market a new act of importance went into effect, by which squatters in Illinois were granted the right of preempting a quarter section and of entering the land upon the payment of one-fourth of the purchase price. This meant that those who had already improved lands in the expectation of purchase as soon as the land office began operations had the first right.

This delayed opening of the land in Illinois by the United States was no intended slight to the territory, for there was no land in the territory which the national government had a right to sell. The United States had adopted the policy of obtaining by cession from the Indian claimants

all lands before opening it to entrance by settlers. Before 1803, the surface of Illinois was covered by the Indian claims, except the region around the French villages and five small tracts in various parts of the territory, which had been obtained for the purpose of building forts. With the year 1803 began the first series of Indian treaties which was finally to drive the Indians from the border of the state. The first treaty was naturally enough with the Illinois confederations whose claim to the southern part was extinguished in 1803; and in 1804 the Sauks and Foxes ceded the territory west of the Illinois and Fox rivers; and in 1805, the land on the Wabash claimed by the Piankashaws was also purchased. This practically ended the first series of Indian treaties and nothing more was attempted until after the close of the War of 1812, when by another series, the most important treaty of which was with the powerful Kickapoos in 1819, all Illinois except the extreme north was opened for settlement. It was therefore not until the time when Illinois entered the Union that conditions were really favorable to immigration.

The influence of these retarding factors in Illinois is conspicuous in the census reports as far as we have them. We have already seen that at the time France ceded the West and Canada to England in 1763, there were about 2000 white settlers in the Illinois country. At the time of the occupation of the territory by George Rogers Clark the population was probably a scant 1500. By 1790 this number had fallen to below 1000 on account of the emigration of the French to Missouri. Although there are no figures the decrease in the French population during the next decade was very marked, but there was compensation for this in the immigration of Americans and Canadian French. During this time the Morrisons, the Reynolds, the Menards, came to Illinois. In 1801 the population had passed the maximum of French settlement and reached almost 2500. Compare this with the population of other western states. Kentucky in 1801 boasted a population of 220,000 and Ohio 45,000. Indiana which had suffered from the same retardation as Illi-

nois contained also about 2500 people. The next census, that of 1810, shows the result of the extinguishing of Indian titles and the promised land sales, for Illinois population numbered over 12 000. But the next eight years saw the actual opening of the land office, the further extinguishing of the Indian land titles, and the beginning of settlements on the prairies. The forces retarding immigration were at last removed. Under the favoring influence of these conditions the population leaped to almost 40,000, an increase of about 28,000 in eight years.

One naturally asks whence came this influx of new men? What drove them to the frontier border to make new homes? The answer is not so very difficult, although much investigation into the origins of our early population remains to be done by our historians. The route to Illinois generally used was by the Ohio, its branches, or by land along its banks, for no longer was the route from the lakes, which was in such constant use by the Canadians, often traveled. Not yet was the Erie Canal opened, which was to bring a tide of immigration from New York and New England. On the Ohio in arks, rafts, and other crafts—the age of the steam-boat was not yet come—or else along the banks on horse-back or by foot, came the immigrants who were to make the great state of Illinois. The easiest route to Illinois determined the character of its earliest population. The immigrants came from Pennsylvania and the south, and the south included not only the seaboard states but also Kentucky and Tennessee. Conditions in these older states drove many to seek for newer lands. A drought in North Carolina in 1816 and the land boom in Kentucky may be cited as subsidiary causes of emigration. A more important factor was the increasing production of cotton in the South and the resulting extension of the plantation system with its slave labor. The small farmer was slowly driven to the uplands or forced to emigrate. The more enterprising took the latter course. With these small farmers there went now and then a large landowner who wished to free himself from the system of slavery. Such was Edward Coles.

These new arrivals made their way to Shawnee Town, which was the centre whence the roads to the various parts of the territory diverged. Here was a small log cabin village incapable of supplying the necessities of the floating population. Situated on the banks of an unfriendly river which threatened yearly to wash the village out of existence, Shawnee Town continued to thrive on immigrant trade and because it was the chief export point for the agricultural products in the extreme south. At Shawnee Town the immigrant made his purchase of land by depositing his first payment and then with his family and all his household goods journeyed to the new farm.

Thus, Illinois was first settled by southern men and the character of the population of the southern part of the state is still that of the south rather than of the north. Streams of immigration from other sources had already begun when the state entered the Union. For instance, Birkbeck and Flower had already begun their English settlement. In 1817 John M. Peck brought his family from Connecticut; but the influence of these important pioneers of Illinois belong to the period of statehood rather than the earlier years. The family histories of our early governors, senators, representatives, and other officials prove the origin of our population. These are almost exclusively of southern birth. Up to 1842, all the governors were southern born or educated. The northern influence belongs to the middle of last century. The true pioneer period is southern.

It is time to close. The purpose of this address has been to show how new was the era in our history that began in 1818. The men who attended the birth of the new state were almost as new as the state herself. They were unconnected with and ignorant of the past development of the region. The long drawn out eighteenth century with its romance and its peculiar hardships was a thing of the past. The handful of French families scattered along the river banks were a negligible quantity, scarcely known and not understood by

the new comers. The past held no traditions for the new state. Her future lay in the hands of those who had just come and those who were to follow. The future was full of hope, the past was as if it had never occurred.